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ABSTRACT

A special education teacher and an administrator in each of 17 small rural public school districts in New Mexico were interviewed to identify problems with and strategies for providing special education services in the districts. According to teachers, the most severe problems involved acquiring appropriate equipment and materials, recruiting related services staff, and staff development. Administrators thought staff recruitment was the most severe problem followed by compliance with state education regulations and staff development. Most districts also reported a failure to provide for special education students aged 18-21 but school finances and transportation were not significant problems for the districts. Respondents suggested strategies in the areas of staff recruitment (contacting college placement centers and professional acquaintances), staff development and retention (sponsoring release time and teacher attendance at conferences and workshops), and finance (involving private professionals and services). Researchers offered general recommendations related to the Division of Special Education's assuming a leadership role in problem solving, the establishment of regional resource centers, the district use of joint powers of agreement for service provision, and the evaluation of the present weighted formula funding system. They also offered 20 specific recommendations for improving services to exceptional children and suggested research directions. (SB)

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Executive Summary

A STUDY OF PROBLEMS AND EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES IN THE PROVISION OF SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES IN THE SMALL RURAL PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICTS OF NEW MEXICO

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Everett Edington, Ed.D., Director

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PREFACE

One of the most pressing problems of the small rural school in New Mexico is that of providing adequate educational preparation for special education students. This study sponsored in part by the New Mexico Center for Rural Education attempts to identify some of the problems which the extremely small school has in providing these educational programs.

We appreciate the cooperation of the administrators and teachers of the 17 schools who participated in the research. This study should enable them in decision making positions in a state to provide more adequate programs for special education students in the small schools.

Everett D. Edington, Director
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

OVERVIEW

The purpose of this study was to identify the problems and strategies in providing special education services in the small rural public school districts of New Mexico. Three general research questions and subquestions in eight research areas were investigated....The general research questions were:

1. What are the problems of small rural public school districts in New Mexico in providing special education services to exceptional children as they are perceived by special education administrators and special education teachers?
2. What are the strategies that have been employed by small rural public school districts in New Mexico to overcome problems in providing adequate special education services for exceptional children?
3. Do special education administrators and special education teachers differ in opinion on the ranking of problems or on the severity of problems in providing special education services in the small rural public school districts of New Mexico?

The specific subquestions were:

a. Student Programs and Services

1) What special education programs/services

are available in small rural public school districts?

2) What special education service delivery models have been used?

b. Transportation

1) Do small rural public school districts have transportation problems which affect the delivery of services to exceptional children?

2) What strategies have been used to improve transportation services?

c. School Finances

1) Do the small rural public school districts have problems in provision of adequate financial support for special education services?

2. What strategies have been employed to best utilize special education funds?

d. Staffing/Recruitment

1) Do the small rural public school districts have problems in staffing/recruitment of special education teachers and related services professionals?

2) What successful recruitment strategies have been employed?

e. Staff Retention

1) Do the small rural public school districts have problems in retention of special educa-

tion teachers and related services professionals?

2) What successful staff retention strategies have been utilized?

f. Staff Development

1) Do the small rural public school districts have problems in provision of special education staff development activities for professionals?

2) What effective staff development strategies have been used?

g. Equipment and Materials

1) Do the small rural public school districts have problems with lack of appropriate special education equipment and materials?

2) What equipment and materials have been effective with rural special education students?

h. Other Problems

1) What other problems in providing special education services are identified by small rural publis school districts?

In addition, based on a review of the literature and feedback and suggestions from local special education teachers and administrators, recommendations for the purpose of improving the delivery of services to rural exceptional children in New Mexico were generated.

A review of the literature indicated that limited information was available pertaining to rural education in general, and even less emphasis had been placed on research and data collection involving the education of rural exceptional children. This study was unique in that it investigated small rural public school districts, and that it involved the only state which has chosen not to participate in Public Law 94-142.

There are 20 small rural public school districts in New Mexico with an average daily membership of 300 or less. The in-depth, on-site interview method was utilized to collect data from one special education teacher and one special education administrator in each of the 17 participating school districts. Various problems precluded all 20 districts from being involved in this investigation.

The Small Rural School District Special Education Interview Schedule was developed through a method using the following steps: (a) formation of research questions and interview schedule by the researcher, (b) review of the research questions and interview schedule by a faculty committee at New Mexico State University, (c) revision of these documents by a qualified editor/technical writer, (d) review of the research questions and interview schedule by a national panel of rural special education experts, (e) pretest of interview schedule, and (f) pilot test of the schedule in two New Mexico public school districts with average daily membership

between 300 and 500. The final document included 65 questions which provided information relative to the three general research questions and the subquestions formulated in the eight research areas.

A majority of the interviewees concluded there was a severe or moderate problem in the provision of special education services for the areas of staff recruitment, staff development, and compliance with state education regulations. A sign test applied to this data revealed a significant systematic difference in opinion between teachers and administrators only in the areas of staff recruitment and appropriate equipment and materials.

Referring to the ranking of problem areas, teachers ranked the three most severe problems as appropriate equipment and materials, related services staff recruitment, and staff development; while administrators cited related services staff recruitment, program compliance, and staff development. A sign test applied to this data indicated a significant difference in ranking between teachers and administrators only in the area of appropriate equipment and materials.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Demographic data indicated the teachers were mainly female, about equally Anglo and Mexican-American, and

generally had five years or less experience in the school district. The administrators were almost exclusively male and Anglo, and generally were employed in the school district for five years or less.

Summary conclusions derived as a result of data analyses are first presented in reference to general research questions one and two, followed by overall conclusions pertinent to the third general research question.

Problems and Effective Strategies in the Provision of Special Services

Students/programs. Failure to provide Child Find programs and services for special education students 18-21 years old was a widespread problem in the school districts. Both respondents in only five school districts (29%) reported an operational Child Find program, while interviewees in just two school districts (12%) agreed that services were provided for special education pupils 18-21 years old. Although pre-school services for the handicapped are not mandatory in New Mexico, the teacher and administrator in just one school district (6%) concurred that this type of program was provided.

There were considerable differences in the percentage of students enrolled in special education programs even among districts of comparable average daily membership. In addition, the teachers and administrators in six school districts

(29%) identified a total of 46 students who needed special education services or were waiting for evaluation, but were not receiving services. The area of identification of students as possibly qualifying for special education service seemed particularly troublesome evidenced by the fact that there were disagreements in responses in eight districts. A majority of school districts (65%) utilized the strategy of combining program levels to provide special education services. Most of the respondents in these districts considered combining levels an effective strategy. No other service delivery models were discussed.

Transportation. The vast majority of interviewees (97%) adjudged the provision of transportation services for special education students in the school districts to be as minimal or no problem. None of the school districts provided separate transportation services for special education students. From a list of six environment and equipment related factors, none were identified by a majority of respondents as inhibitors to the delivery of special education services. Three effective strategies were discussed to improve transportation services, with the use of feeder routes most frequently cited. The results in this area were distinctly different from those commonly reported in the literature.

School finances. In reference to the problem of adequate financing for special education services, 62% of the

participants, including both interviewees from eight school districts (47%) deemed it a minimal or no problem. Only one school district (6%) reported the discontinuation of a special education or a related service due to lack of funds. Financial support for special education was considered less than adequate by a majority of respondents only in the areas of equipment/materials and assessment/diagnosis. None of the school districts polled, however, received any special project funds (other than state formula funds) from the state, federal, or private sources for implementing special education programs.

Eighteen different strategies were offered in the areas of equipment/materials, staff, related services, and other services to best utilize special education funds. Most of the suggestions involved the use of private professionals, private educational contracting services, and interdistrict agreements to provide cost-effective related services and educational diagnosis.

Staffing/recruitment. There appeared to be difficulties in attracting qualified applicants for special education teacher positions, evidenced by the fact that of the seven school districts with vacancies at the end of school year 1980-81, only two received more than two completed applications per opening. In addition, a majority of the interviewees (59%) adjudged that the state special education teacher certification requirements contributed to staffing

problems in the small rural public school districts.

The provision of related services seemed to be a particularly serious dilemma for many of the small rural public school districts. During school year 1981-82, 17 related services programs were provided, 17 related services programs were needed yet not provided, and the teachers and administrators differed in opinion on the necessity of 10 other related programs. In total, 11 school districts (65%) reported identification of at least one related service which was needed yet unavailable due to lack of staff. Confusion over needs and failure to offer services were most apparent for psychological services, physical therapy, occupational therapy, and speech therapy/pathology.

Recruitment of special education teachers and related services professionals was regarded as a severe or moderate problem by 71% of the individuals interviewed, including both respondents in 11 school districts (65%). Ten different recruitment strategies were mentioned by interviewees. Suggestions most often discussed were use of in-state and out-of-state university/college placement centers, personal contacts by teachers to publicize openings and contacts with surrounding schools.

Staff retention. Staff retention was deemed a minimal or no problem by both respondents in 10 school districts (59%) and by 68% of the total individuals interviewed. The turnover rate for special education teachers and related services

professionals was reported as being about the same as that for regular teachers in the district. Reasons most repeatedly stated for special education staff leaving the districts included another job offer, poor housing, dissatisfaction with community, and discontent with the school district.

Thirteen different effective retention strategies were offered in the areas of salary/benefits, professional development, and staff support. Most commonly mentioned strategies were sponsor staff attendance at workshops/conferences, provide teacherages, and support release time for staff professional activities.

Staff development. Both the teachers and administrators in 10 school districts (59%) and a total of 74% of the respondents overall considered the provision of staff development opportunities a severe or moderate problem. None of the school districts provided regular inservice training sessions specifically for special educators and related services professionals, and only four school districts (24%) offered inservice training on special education topics for the regular education staff.

University/college special education activities in the small rural public school districts were extremely limited. Only one school district (6%) reported the placement of special education practicum or student teachers in the district. In just one school district (6%) respondents agreed that a workshop/inservice training session had been

conducted by university/college personnel at their school during the 1980-82 school years. Also, staff in six school districts (35%) could not avail themselves of special education and related college courses because they were situated too far from the main campus of a higher education institution and extension courses were not available within a commutable distance.

A majority of respondents felt that the special educators and related services professionals needed inservice training in nine of the ten specific special education topic areas presented. Although there was some disparity in responses between teachers and administrators, most repeatedly mentioned areas of need were instructional technology, assessment/diagnosis, and curriculum content.

Overall, 10 effective staff development strategies were reported by the interviewees. Sponsoring of attendance at workshops/conferences and supporting interdistrict visits were by far the most commonly discussed suggestions. In addition, a majority of interviewees adjudged that instructional technology would be useful in the provision of special services and that competence in this area would improve the special education teacher's effectiveness in the classroom.

Equipment/materials. The lack of appropriate special education equipment and materials was rated as a minimal or no problem by 59% of those interviewed, including both respondents in five school districts (29%). A majority of inter-

viewees (59%), though, indicated that there were special education equipment and/or material items needed in the district. There was considerable disparity in responses between the teachers and administrators involving both the lack and need of special education items. Also, four of the nine school districts with gifted programs cited the lack of materials as a problem. Several equipment items were identified as needed in the school districts, including microcomputers, which were most repeatedly cited. Though the input of interviewees, extended lists of classroom items found effective with rural exceptional children were formulated.

Other problems. Overall, 53% of the respondents, including both special education teachers and administrators in six school districts (35%) considered compliance with State Department of Education regulations a severe or moderate problem. Student assessment and student placement were specific areas of the regulations identified by a majority of raters as being difficult to comply with.

Though an open-ended item asking for other problems encountered in providing adequate special education services for exceptional children, 29 problem areas were identified. Only six problem areas had origins in four or more school districts. In descending order of frequency mentioned, these six problem areas were (a) lack of parental/guardian involvement, (b) insufficient community support, (c) lack of school

board support, (d) severe language barriers, (e) concern over the focus of State Department of Education regulations, and (f) concern involving possible future transportation problems.

General Conclusions Regarding the Rating and Ranking of Problems in the Provision of Special Education Services

1. In general, the problem areas were ranked from most severe to least severe as follows: (a) related services staff recruitment, (b) program compliance, (c) staff development, (d) equipment and materials, (e) special education teacher recruitment, (f) financial support, (g) staff retention, and (h) transportation.

Overall, a majority of interviewees rated staff recruitment, staff development and program compliance a severe or moderate problem.

2. Determined by both the rating and ranking of problems, staff development and staff recruitment were the two most severe problems encountered within the small rural public school districts. A majority of teachers, administrators, and school districts (concurrence of both respondents) considered these areas to be severe or moderate problems.

3. Although a majority of both teachers and administrators adjudged staff recruitment a severe problem, administrators consistently rated it a more severe problem than teachers.

4. Within the category of staff recruitment, related

services staff recruitment was generally ranked a more severe problem than special education teacher recruitment.

5. Program compliance with State Education Department regulations was considered a severe or moderate problem by a majority of interviewees, although this total included less than a majority of teachers and school districts. There was a tendency for administrators to rank and rate this area as a more severe problem than teachers.

6. Teachers and administrators strongly disagreed as to the severity of the problem of lack of adequate special education equipment and materials. Teachers ranked this area as the most severe problem in the school districts. They consistently ranked and rated lack of appropriate equipment and materials a more severe problem than administrators.

7. A majority of the interviewees felt school finances and staff retention were a minimal or no problem. There was a tendency for administrators to rate and rank staff retention a more severe problem than teachers.

8. Transportation was generally regarded as a minimal or no problem in the small rural public school districts.

9. Overall, there was no significant correlation between the ranking of problem areas by the teacher and administrator groups.

Recommendations

Discussion of recommendations are presented in three

sections: (a) general recommendations which focus on the responsibilities of and interactions between the State Department of Education, universities/colleges in New Mexico, and the small rural public school districts; (b) specific recommendations relative to the research areas investigated in this study; and (c) suggestions for future research. Recommendations are based on a review of the literature and feedback and suggestions from local special education teachers and special education administrators. The thrust of all three sections is to improve services for rural exceptional children.

General Recommendations

Presumably one goal of a statewide public school system is to develop guidelines and regulations which can be applied equitably throughout the entire system. In attempting to help solve the problems of the small public rural school districts in provision of special education services, one must develop viable strategies within the context of the entire educational system. Most strategies which focus solely on the small rural public school districts would be inappropriate for the other districts and unincorporable within the total system. The following suggestions, therefore, are intended to be offered from a realistic, global perspective.

1. The Division of Special Education could assume a leadership role in facilitating a coordinated effort to help

solve the problems of providing adequate services for rural exceptional children. Cooperation and communication between the local school administrators, university/college special education staffs, and the Division of Special Education officials appears inadequate in relation to the provision of special education services for exceptional children in the small rural public school districts. Whatever strategies are eventually adopted, it is absolutely vital that the activities evolve in a planned, systematic, cost-efficient manner.

As a start, the Division of Special Education could organize and conduct a yearly rural special education conference. Participants might include special education teachers and administrators from rural public school districts (possibly include all school districts with an average daily membership of less than 1,000), university/college special education staffs, interested state legislators, and other members of the education field. These meetings would serve as a forum for the following: (a) exchanging ideas, strategies, and suggestions; (b) formulating statewide plans; (c) coordinating grant applications; and (d) developing proposals and/or responses for the State Department of Education and the state legislature. Cooperation and communication are critical to the success of all the ensuing recommendations.

2. One professional within the Division of Special Education could be specifically assigned to work with the

small rural public school districts. In particular, this arrangement would be helpful in addressing the following problem areas: (a) apparent confusion over interpretation of regulations, (b) lack of staff specifically trained in special education administration in many of these districts, and (c) need for relevant technical assistance related specifically to the uniquenesses of the small districts. The intent would be for the staff member to provide consistency and expertise in interactions with this segment of the state's school districts.

3. Regional resource centers could be reestablished and funded by the state. Regional resource centers for the improvement of education for the handicapped were originally created nationwide through Public Law 91-230. These centers often provided diagnostic services, technical assistance, and a large library of materials and equipment for special education teachers and professionals in a particular region (Kirk, 1972). Four regional resource centers were operational in New Mexico during the 1970's. After federal funding discontinued, however, most local school districts chose not to contribute funds to maintain the centers, resulting in the termination of the program, with the exception of the Southwest Special Education Regional Service Center in Las Cruces (Gutierrez, 1982).

Regional resource centers would serve all the school districts in the state, but would be particularly helpful for

smaller and rural school districts in the following areas: (a) provide consultant services, especially in the areas of curriculum development and materials/equipment selection; (b) furnish various staff training materials; and (c) loan equipment and materials for temporary, trial periods. Access to a wide variety of materials and equipment items is especially critical in small districts for two reasons: (a) there are very limited opportunities to share ideas or school items since there is usually only one special education teacher in the district, and (b) often materials/equipment must be attained for just one or two students displaying a particular exceptionality, making it essential to preview purchases to assure they are appropriate and cost-effective.

It is interesting to note that although none of the interview items in this study specifically referred to regional resource centers, four respondents volunteered that these centers should be reopened to assist in provision of staff development materials. It should also be noted that during his presentation at the First Annual Southwestern Conference for Rural Education (1982), the Director of the Division of Special Education strongly supported the regional resource center concept.

4. The small rural public school districts could use joint powers agreements to provide adequate special education services. Gearheart and Wright (1979) aptly stated that if there was any real hope of extending special education

services to smaller school districts, it was through the use of some type of cooperative program. Various plans for the cooperative provision of special education services have evolved in 39 states. New Mexico has chosen to permit interdistrict agreements to facilitate the provision of special education services. Although the capability of developing joint powers agreements between districts is already in existence in New Mexico, this strategy is only being utilized on a limited basis (Clemmons, 1982). The recommendation might be made, that the small rural public school districts utilize the means made available (interdistrict agreements) to provide adequate special education services.

Seven of the small rural public school districts reported utilizing interdistrict agreements. These agreements, however, were limited just to the provision of speech therapy and/or educational diagnosis. Potentially the formulation of joint powers agreements could result in cooperative, planned efforts involving Child Find programs, inservice training and staff development, staff recruitment, provision of related services, special education purchases, provision of educational diagnosis, grant writing, and other activities. None of these undertakings require any significant shifts in resources from one district to another. Instead, several districts could combine funds and efforts to develop activities/programs that any one district would find necessary, yet very difficult, if not impossible, to adequately provide for itself.

Nachtigal (1980) has remarked that those interested in change in rural areas must be aware of the various aspects of "rural reality." Perhaps the best way to bring this strategy to fruition is for the Division of Special Education to disseminate information to the rural school administrators, school boards, and local communities as to the purposes and advantages of joint powers agreements in providing special education services, rather than simply imposing this plan on districts. It must be demonstrated that these agreements are viable, nonthreatening solutions to special education and related problems. In addition, state technical assistance in developing and maintaining these agreements is essential.

Finally, a study could be conducted by the State Department of Education or the State Legislative Finance Committee to determine the need for additional state financial support for these cooperative educational units. If the joint powers agreements are to extend beyond sharing the services of one or two ancillary professionals, then it is projected that at least some supplementary state support would be necessary for the district serving as the fiscal agent for the cooperating districts.

This recommendation is based on the strategy of utilizing existing structures to attain desired ends or objectives. Obviously if comprehensive interdistrict agreements are not utilized and special education programs remain in noncompliance with state and federal standards/regulations, then

alternative solutions must be pursued. In such a situation, two cooperative systems the state should reinvestigate for possible adoption are the Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) plan utilized in Colorado and the educational service center concept operational in Texas.

5. A formal study might be conducted by the State Department of Education or the State Legislative Finance Committee to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of the present weighted formula funding system in generating sufficient funds for special education programs in the small rural public school districts. This system has the following inherent potential drawbacks which may impact on small rural public school districts: (a) extreme problems in obtaining reliable cost data upon which to base funding formulae, (b) great difficulty in comparing costs for programs in urban areas versus rural areas and in large districts versus small districts, (c) complexity in periodically revising formulae to reflect current costs, (d) possibility of misclassifying students to generate additional monies, and (e) possibility of utilizing special education funds in areas other than special education (Garms, Guthrie, & Pierce, 1978). Perhaps the key consideration is whether the present funding system is adequate for districts where there are so few special education students that various exceptionalities and levels of pupils must be combined to establish one program or a fraction of one program.

Despite the fact that only 38% of the interviewees in this study considered lack of adequate funding for special education either a severe or moderate problem, a formal study would provide data in reference to the following concerns: (a) Are adequate funds generated and utilized for special education programs? (b) Are problems in lack of appropriate special education equipment/materials, inadequate staff development activities, and provision of educational assessment/diagnosis linked to insufficient funding? and (c) Are there any misclassification problems involving student placement and/or provision of special education and related services?

One possible funding alternative worth investigating for smaller schools which have very few special education students who generate limited amounts of money is an excess cost reimbursement system. The philosophy behind this strategy is that the state should reimburse districts for the extra costs of operating special programs, that expenditures be made for specified purposes and that districts should be accountable for all expenditures (Garns et al., 1978).

Potentially, the major advantage of this system for the small rural public school districts is that budgets are based on needs and that money is reimbursed for the actual costs of operating special education programs. Through an excess cost reimbursement system, administrators could focus their energies on identifying student needs and planning for them, even though there are limited numbers of pupils and various

exceptionalities to be served in the district. State technical assistance in planning and budget formulation would be a key to the success of this system.

6. University/college education staffs and local school administrators could work cooperatively to extend special education practicum and student teacher programs to the small rural public school districts. During school year 1981-82, there were no special education practicum or student teachers placed in the small rural public school districts surveyed. The major advantages for the school districts of supporting and developing preservice training of special educators are three: (a) lower pupil-staff ratio for provision of services to exceptional children, (b) enhanced professional development of local staff due to interactions with student teacher/practicum and university/college supervisors, and (c) development of special educators for possible future employment in the district or other rural school district.

Several states have developed a variety of preservice training experiences for rural special educators which have realized varying degrees of success. In New Mexico, it seems at least initially, the basic student teacher/practicum program could be adapted to accommodate the parties involved while still offering a viable, valuable rural preservice experience. Frequency of field observation/evaluation of the student teacher/practicum would be the critical concern. Possible solutions to this problem might include: (a) less

frequent, but more in-depth observations, (b) transfer of some supervisory responsibilities to the local administrator, and (c) utilization of daily logs and/or weekly telephone interviews to maintain contact and foster interaction between the student and the university/college supervisor. Also, it seems only practical and realistic that to the greatest extent possible, local school districts coordinate efforts with the nearest university/college that offers special education student teacher and practicum programs. Again, statewide communication and cooperation are essential. The initiation of these programs in the small rural public school districts could impact on the problem area of staff recruitment, staff retention, and staff development.

7. Special education teacher certification requirements could be reviewed by the State Educational Standards Commission and revised to a noncategorical system of professional endorsement. Since educators in small districts often must teach several different subjects, levels, or exceptionalities, the entire issue of certification and multiple certification for professionals in these schools is often complex and confusing. Evidenced by the fact that over 900 teacher certification waivers were granted in New Mexico during the 1981-82 school year, it is apparent that there are serious problems throughout the state in the area of teacher certification.

In reference to rural special education teachers, 59% of the interviewees in this study considered state certification

requirements to contribute to district staffing problems. The concern expressed most repeatedly was the need for a generalist in special education rather than a specialist endorsed in one specific area of exceptionality. In rural public school districts rarely are there enough students of a single handicapping condition to warrant an entire program as the special education teacher usually is required to teach in a combination program with a variety of exceptional students (Cole, Smith & Ranken, 1981). In the districts surveyed, for example, all special education programs were described as noncategorical as several exceptionalities were served in each classroom. An alternative recommendation to the two solutions offered above is to totally revise the state special education teacher certification system from a categorical approach to a noncategorical or cross-categorical approach. Special education teacher certification under the proposed system would include endorsements in two areas: the mildly handicapped and the moderately/severely handicapped. Different provisions would have to be considered for teachers of the severely hearing impaired, severely visually impaired, and the gifted.

Lerner (1976) perceived the noncategorical movement as one of the emerging directions in special education. She found this approach preferable for the provision of special education services in public schools for four reasons: (a)

categories of exceptionality are not discrete and separate entities, (b) treatment procedures for various handicapping conditions are frequently similar, (c) it is often difficult to differentiate various exceptionalities through present diagnostic methods, and (d) it is a movement encouraged by a cluster of court decisions supporting claims of discrimination by placement of children in special education categorical programs.

Obviously, adoption of this approach would have tremendous ramifications, including direct impact on teacher preparation programs, and provision and funding of services. The noncategorical approach would be a very appropriate solution for the small rural public school districts but would also be practical for nonrural and large school systems. Several states, including Oregon and Massachusetts, have established noncategorical systems of teacher certification and special education services provision.

8. The Division of Special Education could develop and implement a viable, comprehensive statewide system of personnel development. Presently, there is no comprehensive statewide system for special education personnel development in New Mexico (Gutierrez, 1982). In addition, the provision of staff development opportunities was identified in this study as one of the most severe special education problems in the small rural public school districts. Long-term and short-term plans could evolve through joint efforts with university/

college facilities, regional resource center staffs (Recommendation 3), local special educators and administrators, professional organizations, and other interested groups/individuals. Sections 121a.380 through 121.386 of the regulations under Public Law 94-142 could serve as a model for developing staff development plans in New mexico.

Perhaps one of the most promising long-term solutions to staff inservice training problems in rural areas is the development and use of exportable instructional packages (Mader, Resick, Witze, Ferrara, & Rudrud, 1981). These packages might include videodiscs, slide-tape offerings, videotapes, workbooks, cassette tapes, and other materials or combinations of materials. This method could be employed by university/college staffs to provide both inservice training and extension courses throughout the state. Instructional packages offer five potential advantages in providing staff development opportunities: (a) reduce on-site time required of university/college faculty, (b) maintain quality of instruction, (c) enrich learning experiences, (d) utilize alternative learning modes, and (3) provide a cost-effective educational alternative. This seems like an especially promising strategy for the seven small rural public school districts located more than 100 miles from the nearest main campus of a higher education institution that offers special education and related courses. Efforts in this area should be coordinated with the regional resource centers which could

also acquire and make available various exportable instructional packages.

As an initial step, the Division of Special Education should regularly provide workshops/inservice training sessions for special educators throughout the state. The critical points are that these presentations be offered periodically; that they be scheduled for various sites across the state; and that training sessions be based on needs assessments which identify current topics of concern. The results of this study, for example, indicated the inservice needs for special educators in the small rural public school districts to be in the areas of instructional technology, assessment/diagnosis, and curriculum content (especially for the gifted).

Again, cooperation and coordination of efforts are vital. For example, with appropriate planning some of the workshop presentors could be recruited through a modified "loaned professionals" program whereby school districts could allow and support a local expert to develop and present workshops in their area of specialty at several regional meetings across the state.

Specific Recommendations

In total, interviewees discussed 54 different, specific effective strategies which refer to the problem areas inves-

tigated in this study. As an overall suggestion when a problem is identified in a small rural public school district, all the effective strategies depicted for that area should be thoroughly explored to evaluate whether any are adoptable to the specific needs of the district.

Based on a review of the literature and input from respondents, the following specific recommendations seem particularly appropriate for improving services to exceptional children in the small rural public school districts of New Mexico. These suggestions reflect the problem areas identified in this study, are typically interrelated, and are related to the general recommendations discussed previously.

1. It would be beneficial if state technical assistance was immediately supplied to the small rural public school districts in the following areas: (a) developing Child Find programs, (b) providing services for special education students 18-21 years old, (c) developing appropriate student assessment and student placement procedures, particularly in relation to related services, (d) establishing preschool services for the handicapped, (e) developing policies and procedures for close cooperation between local districts and service alternative providers (e.g. community programs, residential facilities), and (f) establishing programs for the gifted.

Small rural public school districts might work with surrounding districts to coordinate Child Find efforts. The

cooperative activities of the Wagon Mound, West Las Vegas, Mora, and Las Vegas city schools could be used as a model for other districts to emulate.

3. The State Department of Education could disseminate information to the small rural public school districts on procedures for the emergency funding of school vans and other vehicles for use with the handicapped.

4. School districts with transportation problems might explore the practicability of utilizing feeder routes.

5. Local special education staff might preview new equipment/materials through utilization of materials fairs, regional resource centers, university/college materials centers, or interdistrict loans before purchasing these classroom items.

6. Small rural public school districts could investigate various additional sources of special education funds to initiate special projects. Several school districts could work together to apply for state, federal, or private grants. State technical assistance may be made available for distributing information on requests for proposals and assisting in grant writing.

7. Small rural public school districts might explore the feasibility of establishing interagency agreements to provide health/nurse services, audiological services, psychological services, and other possible services.

8. Active recruitment of special education and related services professionals could involve the following strategies:

(a) utilization of in-state and out-of-state university/college placement centers, (b) cooperation with surrounding school districts by sharing information on teacher applicants, (c) personal contact by teachers with other professionals through university/college education classes, (d) direct contact with special education chairpersons/coordinators to attain information on possible candidates, (e) advertisement of openings in newspapers in the metropolitan areas of New Mexico and surrounding states, (f) recruitment of statewide conferences/conventions of professional groups (e.g., speech and language pathologists could be recruited at the New Mexico chapter of the American Speech, Hearing, and Language Association (ASHLA) yearly conference).

9. Local staff might be encouraged and supported to return to a university/college to pursue certification or licensure in areas of critical district need. The strategies of awarding paid sabbaticals and paying tuition for summer coursework for this purpose should be seriously considered.

10. The strategy of purchasing or building teacherages should be thoroughly explored and implemented if feasible.

11. The four-day school week calendar could seriously be considered for adoption. Preliminary evaluation of this alternative calendar indicated that schools in New Mexico implementing this made gains in student achievement and economic savings (New Mexico four-day, 1981). This could also be very beneficial in the areas of staff recruitment,

staff retention, and provision of transportation services.

12. Staff retention/staff development strategies of supporting interdistrict visits, sponsoring conference/ workshop attendance, and allowing professional release time might be used regularly and systematically.

13. Small rural public school districts could join with other surrounding districts to provide regular, monthly regional inservice training opportunities for special educators and related services professionals.

14. All professionals and paraprofessionals in the district could receive yearly inservice training on basic special education topics. Service delivery alternatives include use of (a) commercially prepared materials, (b) outside consultants, (c) local staff, or (d) regional staff. This basic information on special education might also be presented to the local school board and made available to any interested local organization.

15. Local school districts could develop yearly, district-wide comprehensive personnel development plans which include and integrate staff development activities for special education teachers and related service professionals.

16. Small rural public school districts might seriously consider increasing their use of instructional technology, including microcomputers and instructional packages, to better provide special education services. Instructional technology could be used as classroom aids and tools to

improve acquisition of instructional goals. State technical assistance could be made available along with assistance from the regional resource centers. In addition, this is an area where inservice training appears to be a high priority.

17. Various community resources could be explored to provide better services for exceptional children. Volunteers may work as additional aides in the classroom, and many individuals in the community could help direct special projects with gifted students. For example, in one school district polled, the curator of a local museum/monument provided expert guidance for a group of gifted students who were studying archaeology.

18. Four-H (4-H) for handicapped programs could be initiated in local communities. The 4-H program could provide opportunities for exceptional children to develop independent living skills, occupational skills, social skills, and leisure time skills. In addition, these activities could be instrumental in developing public awareness and acceptance of special education. Other similar activities or programs should be considered.

19. Small rural public school districts might develop a two-phase parent training program. Initially, special education teachers and other staff appear to need intensive inservice training in the areas of parent involvement and parent training. After completion of these staff development activities, a formal program could be started to sys-

tematically promote parent awareness and encourage parent involvement in the education of their handicapped children. This training should also stress working with minority and non-English speaking parents. The intent could be to increase parent activity beyond simply signing IEP's and attending annual conferences.

20. Small rural public school districts might consider combining special education program levels to more effectively utilize staff and school funds.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on this study, the following recommendations for future research are made:

1. Future studies could identify the problems and effective strategies in providing special education services in the other 69 school districts in New Mexico. The objectives, purposes, and procedures of this study could serve as a foundation for examining special education programs in school districts within the following enrollment categories: (a) average daily membership between 301 and 1,000, (b) average daily membership between 1,001 and 5,000, and (c) average daily membership greater than 5,000. The information generated by this proposed research would seem vital in local and statewide planning for the provision of comprehensive special education services for all exceptional children.

2. The 29 other special education and related problem areas discussed by the participants in this study could be systematically explored to determine their extent and severity within the small rural public school districts of New Mexico. Many of these problem areas have not been discussed in the rural special education literature and could provide further insights into the provision of adequate special education services. In particular, lack of parent/guardian involvement, and insufficient school board and community support of special education appear to be critical areas to investigate.

3. This study was based on input and feedback from special education teachers and special education administrators, however, future research efforts in the small rural public school districts could include the reactions and opinions of school board members, parents/guardians, and exceptional students.

4. It appears that it would be beneficial if a comprehensive study was conducted in New Mexico to describe the special education student population. Three key questions might be addressed: (a) What are the prevalence rates for the various categories of disorders? (b) What are the incidence rates for the various categories of disorders? and (c) Are either of the above factors affected by size of school district, size of community, or region of the state?

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